

Interpreting Prophetic Literature

*Historical and Exegetical Tools
for Reading the Prophets*

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Getting Started

The majority of this book will focus upon reading the literature of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve), not to create experts in the individual books, but to introduce students to the process of understanding and interpreting prophetic literature. In introductions to the Old Testament as a whole or to the prophetic writings in particular, the art of learning to read this literature is seldom given the attention most beginning students need. Further, textbooks dealing with the exegetical process often suffer from two deficits faced by beginning students approaching prophetic literature. First, most introductions to the exegetical process assume that the student has some measure of competence in Hebrew. In both seminaries and colleges, however, most students have their first exposure to prophetic literature before they have completed a Hebrew course. Second, without exception, introductions to exegetical methodology illustrate the various methods from narrative literature (i.e., the Torah and the Former Prophets [Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings]). Seldom are prophetic speeches, forms, or collections given any attention at all. As a result of these two shortcomings, beginning students struggle to understand the poetry and the rhetorical logic of smaller and larger units within the prophetic writings.

Interpreting Prophetic Literature seeks to fill this gap for beginning students. It will focus upon the art of reading prophetic literature without assuming students are working from the Hebrew text. It will focus upon illustrating the markers and the methods most important for understanding prophetic literature. It will get students started in the process of reading these texts. Examples provided will be illustrative, not comprehensive.

What this book will not do is to replace the use of a traditional textbook that introduces each prophet and each prophetic book. This book does not

attempt to serve as an introduction to the prophetic writings. It will not deal extensively with the historical backgrounds of the individual prophetic books. Rather, this book will attempt to supplement such introductions by focusing upon the art of reading prophetic literature.

Before turning to the interpretive process in chapters 2–4, this chapter will do two things. First, it will offer a few comments about the broader ancient Near Eastern background of prophets and prophecy, as well as the role of prophets in the narrative literature of the Hebrew Bible. Second, this chapter will provide an overview of the interpretive process itself, including some suggestions for students on how to use multiple English translations as a means of compensating for the lack of access to Hebrew.

PROPHECY, PROPHETS, AND PROPHETIC BOOKS

In order to understand and to appreciate Old Testament prophetic literature as it has been transmitted to us, one must realize that prophecy has a long history in the ancient Near East. Prophets can be documented in the region more than half a millennium prior to the earliest known reference to the nation of Israel. Prophets also appear in Old Testament narratives that recount episodes from the story of Israel and Judah long before the time of the prophetic figures for whom the collections within the Latter Prophets are named. Yet these narrative traditions regarding prophets do not adequately prepare modern readers to understand and to engage the Latter Prophets. The four scrolls that comprise the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve) are composite collections containing speeches, commentary, narratives, and various poetic forms. The arrangement of the material within these scrolls demonstrates that sources from different time periods have been transmitted, periodically structured, and updated with newer material that reflects changing realities. These three issues (transmission, shaping, and updating) will be discussed very briefly to provide some context from which to begin learning to read the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible.

Prophecy in the Ancient Near East

Prophecy in the ancient Near East (ANE) has a long history. Already in the eighteenth century BCE prophets played a significant role in the political and religious life of the Mesopotamian community at Mari. The Mari tablets include quite a number of letters and reports concerning prophetic figures. These accounts referred to prophets using a variety of terms, terms whose meaning suggests that the prophets in Mari divided themselves into func-

tional groups according to the type of revelation they practiced. This diversity of practices suggests that in Mari the role of prophets and prophecy had already developed a complex social network and function.

Terms used to refer to these prophetic figures include *āpilu* (meaning roughly, “one who answers,” *assinnu* (male cult prostitute, or perhaps a eunuch), the *muḥḥû* (the ecstatic), the *nabû* (“the diviner), and the *barû* (the one who sees [i.e., interprets omens]). The first three of these appear in the Mari texts while the last one appears in Old Babylonian texts. Most of these figures, it is presumed, had some connection to the cult, but most of them we know because they, or their speeches, are referenced in the royal correspondence associated with king Zimri Lim of Mari (1779–1757 BCE). In addition to the variety of names used to refer to those offering advice on behalf of the gods at Mari, one also finds a wide variety of types of divination, including augury, dream interpretation, and oracles. Many of these prophetic figures were required to include pieces of their hair and hems from the garments with their statements. While it is not entirely clear how these items functioned, they imply a serious ritual designed to prove that the prophet should be considered reliable. In fact, it is not uncommon that the *āpilu* include reference to confirmation of the message by some other form of divination (e.g., extispicy, the use of animal entrails to predict the future). This range of terms and implied functions in Mari thus appears to have been even broader than the relationships implied among the biblical prophets.

Reading through this correspondence, one is frequently reminded of a significant difference between these prophetic reports and Old Testament prophetic literature. Often, such documents were recovered as part of some kind of official archive. Consequently, these accounts served a very different function from prophetic literature in that they were either addressed to some particular government official or, in later texts, found at the palace of Assyrian kings. They may contain information intended for the officials conducting the divination.

Consider the examples of sixty-three recorded “Mesopotamian Omens” listed in *COS* 1:423–26. These oracles illustrate a variety of divinatory techniques including observation of animal entrails (extispicy), unusual births, human behavior, random events (cledomancy), dreams (oneiromancy), and reactions of oil and water when a stone is dropped into a basin (lecanomancy). They record various signs to observe. As such, they serve as a resource for practitioners of these divinatory arts.

See also the list of dream meanings that recount various dream images, followed by an assessment (either “good” or “bad”) and an explanation. The top of the columns begins: “If a man sees himself in a dream . . .” What follows contains various examples of dreams and their significance:

“Eating the flesh of a donkey. Good. It means his promotion.
Eating the flesh of a crocodile. Good. [It means] living off the property of
an official.”

“Eating a filleted catfish. Bad. His seizure by a crocodile.
Seeing his face in a mirror. Bad. It means another wife.”¹

Both the collection of oracles and the dream book indicate the formulations were intended as resources for those who were offering these services, not for those who requested them.

Prophets in the Old Testament

By contrast, oracles recounted in biblical prophecy are largely directed against the community itself. Often, even when oracles are directed against an individual, such as a king or another prophet, those oracles are recounted in ways that make it clear that the story is told for the benefit of the reader. For example, consider Amos 7:10–17. This text contains a brief episode of confrontation between Amos, the prophet, and Amaziah, the (presumably chief) priest at Bethel. It is the voice of the narrator, however, who structures the conversation that provides the biographical information necessary to make sense of this confrontation.

The didactic function of the prophetic corpus should not be overlooked. In point of fact, all four scrolls of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings) and of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve) demonstrate that, whatever the sources utilized in compiling these collections, the collections have been shaped with an eye toward their transmission for and reflection by later generations. They do not present themselves as the property of priests or kings, but as words addressed to the people of YHWH.

Prophets serving deities other than YHWH appear in the Old Testament, though usually in polemical contexts where these prophets are being condemned or eliminated. Their presence, however, suggests that biblical writers were aware of prophets working for other deities inside and outside their country. One of the most prominent stories inside the Bible concerns the prophet Balaam in the time of Moses (Num. 22–24). Balaam was a foreign prophet, also known from an inscription outside the Bible (Deir `Alla), although the Deir `Alla text comes from several centuries later than the time in which the exodus story is set.² These extrabiblical texts portray Balaam as a very powerful prophetic seer. By contrast, the Balaam stories in Numbers 22–24 recount several ways in which YHWH circumscribes Balaam’s power so as to prove the impotence of foreign prophets against YHWH.

Such appropriation of other traditions illustrates one way in which prophetic narratives function within larger stories.

Similarly, prophetic narratives illustrate the power of YHWH over the power of foreign deities in Old Testament narratives. Prophets of Baal are defeated by Elijah in the reign of Ahab (1 Kgs. 18); later, Jehu defeats the prophets of Asherah (2 Kgs. 10:18–31) in the middle of the ninth century BCE. These stories indicate that these prophets of foreign gods were involved in sacrifice, and they even presuppose the presence of a Baal temple. Later, texts indicate that the worship of Baal was still advocated by prophets serving Baal in the late seventh century (Jer. 2:8; cf. Zeph. 1:4–5).

Prophets of YHWH play a major role in Israel and Judah in the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings). To put this role in perspective, one need only contemplate the implications of the way one speaks about the Old Testament canon. In Christian tradition, the second major section of the canon has often been called the historical books. By contrast, in the Hebrew Bible (the Tanak), the second section of the canon is called the Prophets (Nebiim). Remarkably, though, the first four scrolls of the Nebiim in the Hebrew Bible (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings) constitute the same books that form the foundation of “the historical books” of the Christian canon.

What a difference names can make! Each of these names focuses upon a significant aspect of these narrative texts. One can understand how these books came to be called historical books in the Christian canon: they tell the story of Israel and Judah from the Hebrews’ entry into the land until Jerusalem’s destruction. It is not a history in the modern sense, but a theologically shaped recounting of that story. However, calling these writings the historical books also underplays the role that prophets play in the story itself. In fact, beginning in Deuteronomy 18, the role of Moses as prophet prepares the ground for the ongoing role of prophetic leadership when entering the land, beginning in Joshua.

In Deuteronomy 18 Moses is presented as the prophet par excellence. A significant criterion concerning the role of the prophet is the juxtaposition of commands prohibiting divination, as practiced by the nations, in 18:9–14 with the promise from YHWH in 18:15–22 (see especially 18:15, 18) that YHWH will provide Israel with prophets like Moses when they enter the land. The primary role of prophets in Deuteronomy 18:18 is to speak faithfully the words that YHWH has communicated to them. One certainly sees this role of prophet play out in many of the episodes in the Former Prophets, but that is not the only way in which prophets appear within the larger narrative. In the Former Prophets, one finds prophets performing duties as ecstasies, disciples, counselors, insurgents, and intermediaries for YHWH.

Bands of (ecstatic) prophets can be seen in passages like 1 Samuel 10. Periodically, these groups appear in narrative texts, and the groups are portrayed as ecstatic prophets operating on the margins of society, especially in narratives concerning the early monarchic period in the books of Samuel and Kings. In 1 Samuel 10, for example, Saul joins a band of ecstatic prophets and becomes the object of ridicule (1 Sam. 10:10–12).

Elisha's disciples in Bethel would be another such group, and one also sees a certain kind of institutionalizing in this narrative. Groups of prophets could band together formally, as 2 Kings 2 suggests. There a group of prophets are called "sons of prophets," and they recognize Elijah as their leader. The term "prophet," then, applies both to the disciples and to the leader. At Elijah's death, these disciples transferred their allegiance to Elisha (2 Kgs. 2:15). Many scholars believe that prophetic groups like these may have continued for generations and constituted the groups who transmitted the words of prophets after their death. Some call these groups schools, while others refer to them as tradents, a more neutral term that may originally have included followers of a prophet (before they were transmitted by other groups of scribes and temple officials).

The fact that these groups were known as "sons of prophets" suggests that the prophet would have been known as the "father" of the group. This idea helps one to understand the mocking tone of the proverb associated with Saul in 1 Samuel 10:11–12, where an unnamed character is quoted as asking about the relationship of Saul to this group, "And who is their father?" The sarcastic implications seem clear enough. Saul has just been anointed king by Samuel, and Saul becomes one of the prophetic followers. Such language may also lie behind the famous quote of Amos when Amaziah accuses him of prophesying for money. Amos responds, "I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet" (Amos 7:14). Narrative episodes such as these suggest that while such groups were known in Judah and Israel, they were treated often with suspicion by the political and religious establishment.

Prophets are, however, also depicted in roles of power as political and military counselors. Nathan is presented as a faithful prophet who advised (2 Sam. 7) and then confronted David (2 Sam. 12) before colluding with Bathsheba to arrange for Solomon to become king at David's death (1 Kgs. 1). Prophets also offered oracles to kings concerning military plans, not unlike the prophets delivering messages to kings in the Mari letters. Of course, prophesying for the king created pressure for the prophets to deliver messages that the king wanted to hear. For example, 1 Kings 22 recounts how the king of Israel summoned four hundred prophets to deliver oracles on the outcome of the impending battle. The king of Judah, however, wanted to know whether there was still another prophet, apparently suspecting that the unanimity of so

many professional prophets meant they were telling the king what he wanted to hear. These examples of prophets demonstrate that some were deemed reliable and respectable counselors while others were not.

At the same time, prophets could be perceived by political and religious leaders as antagonists, because they dared to speak messages that challenged the king or the king's policy. For example, 2 Kings 9:1–7 demonstrates that Elisha sided with Jehu when Jehu led an insurrection against the house of Ahab. Jehu had his own reasons for revolting, but Elisha threw his support behind Jehu, because Ahab's wife, Jezebel, had been persecuting and killing prophets (2 Kgs. 9:7). To be sure, the biblical text casts the message of the prophets in religious terms, but because this message was directed against the king and the king's family, these actions also had political implications.

Genuine prophets, at their core, are treated as spokespersons for YHWH. Their history of standing against the power structures of what they perceived to be unjust political leaders becomes embedded in the traditions about prophets, even to the point that YHWH's decision to destroy Israel includes the accusation that both Israel and Judah failed to listen to YHWH's prophets: "Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets'" (2 Kgs. 17:13). When one sees these dynamics frequently running through the narrative episodes of the story of Judah and Israel, one begins to understand why in Jewish tradition this part of the canon is called the Former Prophets, not the historical books.

Prophetic Books

As noted above, prophets and prophecy play a significant role in the narrative traditions that recount the story of Israel and Judah. Conversely, of the fifteen prophetic figures for whom collections are named within the four scrolls of the Latter Prophets, only two (Isaiah and Jonah) are mentioned by name in the books of 1 and 2 Kings, the primary narrative recounting the story of Israel and Judah. Later narratives of Chronicles and Ezra also refer to three others: Jeremiah (2 Chr. 36:22 = Ezra 1:1), along with Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1; 6:14). Thus the prophets named in the scrolls of the Latter Prophets play a relatively minor role in the narrative traditions of the Old Testament. These collections have a complex history.

Most models for understanding how prophetic books reached the form in which we now have them do not presume that a prophet simply sat down and composed the book. Rather, most prophetic books developed in stages. The precise nature of these processes differs from one corpus to another, but they

share some common patterns. Most (but probably not all) of the prophetic writings began as synopses of prophetic speeches. These speeches were either remembered or transmitted orally by those familiar with the prophet, or they were recorded as brief, written records of memorable sayings.

Over time these sayings were gathered together in small collections where they continued to be studied, interpreted, and applied in new contexts. Sometimes, these new applications were incorporated into the texts, expanding or clarifying the message for later generations. One clear way to see this is by comparing the Hebrew text of Jeremiah with the LXX (Greek text) of the same material. The Hebrew version of Jeremiah is longer than the LXX by roughly one-eighth. Scholars almost universally recognize that the majority of the differences have arisen by relatively late additions to the Hebrew text. The nature of these additions often shows reflection on the text themselves. Consider Jeremiah 6:27–7:4, as shown in chart 1. The additions in the MT version (followed by English translations) show that someone realized that 7:2b–4 represents a new speech, since it is set in the temple (see 7:4), while the previous unit is set outside the city at the crossroads (see 6:16). The second part of 7:2b in the MT further anticipates the change in location by specifying the people of Judah have entered the (temple) gates.

Eventually, these smaller collections were themselves copied together onto scrolls, but in the process these collections were also shaped by those

Chart 1: Hebrew and Greek Versions of Jeremiah 6:27–7:4

English Translation of Jer 6:30–7:4 (MT)	English Translation of Jer 6:27–7:4 (LXX)
<p>³⁰They call them rejected silver, because the LORD has rejected them.</p> <p>^{7:1}The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, ²Stand in the gate of the LORD's house and proclaim there this word, and say:</p> <p>^{7:2b}Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah, <u>who enter by these gates to worship the LORD!</u> ³Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place, ⁴Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'</p>	<p>³⁰Call ye them reprobate silver, because the LORD has rejected them.</p> <p>[7:1–2a MISSING IN LXX]</p> <p>²Hear ye the word of the LORD, all Judea. ³Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, correct your ways and your devices, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. ⁴Trust not in yourselves with lying words, for they shall not profit you at all, saying, It is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.</p>

who combined the collections. For example, consider the collection known as Amos. It has four sections: The oracles against the nations (chaps. 1–2), the sayings (chaps. 3–6), the vision cycle (7:1–9:6), and the increasingly hopeful conclusion (9:7–15). Each of these sections has certain characteristics that distinguish it from the other parts of Amos, but each section has elements that connect it in various ways to the writing as a whole (see chap. 5 in this book). For example, the vision cycle contains five stylized vision reports (7:1–3, 4–6, 7–9; 8:1–3; 9:1–4), but after the third and fourth vision report, one finds other material that is not intrinsically related to the vision reports.

The placement of this nonvisionary material within the vision cycle is not, however, without rationale. The narrative report of the confrontation between Amos and Amaziah in 7:10–17 appears between the third and fourth vision reports because it cites a line from the vision report that precedes it (see reference to Jeroboam dying by the sword in 7:9 and 7:11). Also, 8:4–14 interrupts the fourth (8:1–3) and fifth (9:1–4) vision reports with material that sounds very much like material in the sayings sections and even repeats several key phrases from elsewhere in Amos, so that 8:4–14 functions much like a reprise of some of the key ideas in the book to that point. The fact that the fourth vision announces the “end” of the kingdom and the fifth vision describes the end makes 8:4–14 a logical point to summarize the book to that point. Thus, particularly in some books, the idea of the gradual combination of smaller collections has much to offer with regard to the changing character of the book, but gradual accretion alone is insufficient to explain the development of the book in its entirety.

Periodically, however, some of the scrolls also show signs that they have been shaped, at least in part, thematically or chronologically. For example, Ezekiel lists some fourteen dates in the headings of some of the speeches, and all of them occur in chronological order, except for a couple oracles against Egypt.³ Nevertheless, Ezekiel shows signs of another common organizing principle in that the majority of statements in chapters 1–24 pronounce words of judgment, while chapters 25–32 contain oracles against foreign nations, and chapters 33–48 largely contain promises.

Ezekiel is not alone in presenting more than one organizing principle. Most of the prophetic writings start with judgment and then move to more hopeful statements. Further, ten of the twelve prophetic writings composing the Book of the Twelve owe their current location to some kind of chronological reflection.⁴ Similarly, the scrolls of Isaiah and the Twelve begin with prophets of the eighth century BCE and conclude with prophecies dated to the Persian period (538–332 BCE). Isaiah, however, specifies only one prophet by name, while the Book of the Twelve covers the same time frame with twelve named prophetic figures. Further, each of the twelve writings in the Book

of the Twelve shows evidence of its own internal arrangement of prophetic material. For example, Zephaniah follows a pattern similar to Ezekiel, in that Zephaniah begins with judgment sayings (1:1–2:3), moves to a series of oracles against foreign nations that culminates in a surprising pronouncement of judgment against Jerusalem (2:4–3:8), and then concludes with a series of promises (3:9–20).

All of these arrangements suggest that the prophetic writings and scrolls do not constitute a random series of unrelated speeches but have been collected and periodically shaped with an eye toward the larger collection. Consideration of the implications of the shaping of these scrolls represents a relatively recent phenomenon in the scholarly study of prophetic literature, but one that shows considerable promise moving forward. Nevertheless, while these issues are important, they are not the focal point of this book. Introductions to the prophets will describe these elements in greater detail. This book will concentrate on the reading and interpretive process, attempting to guide students who are engaging prophetic texts seriously for the first time. It is to this task that the remainder of this book will now turn.

THE PROCESS OF INTERPRETATION

The idea for this book came from my students. When assigned the task of writing an exposition paper on specific texts, students found it much easier to complete the assignment in the narrative portions of the Old Testament than in prophetic texts. When I consulted introductions to Old Testament interpretive methods, I found they offered no help. These methodologies, almost without exception, illustrate the various methods of Old Testament study with examples from the narrative literature, and perhaps an occasional reference to Psalms. Introductions to prophetic literature are indispensable, but most of these studies focus upon other questions (e.g., date, authorship, and arrangement). As such, they tend to present the fruits of other people's readings of prophetic literature without orienting students to the process of reading prophetic texts closely for themselves.

Introducing the reading process to beginning students, most of whom do not know Hebrew, will thus be the focus of this book. It assumes no knowledge of Hebrew, though occasionally (and unavoidably) it will be necessary to make particular comments about Hebrew words or syntax. These linguistic references, however, are kept to a minimum. Some considerations about how to use English translations *do* need to be explored, and before turning to the more detailed introduction of the interpretive process, a few general remarks about the purpose and process of interpretation may also prove beneficial.

Using English Translations

Using English translations wisely requires students to know something about the nature of the various translations, as well as the purpose for comparing them. The purpose of translation comparison is manifold. Selecting several English translations allows one to compare these translations for help in interpreting phrases, understanding the range of meanings of significant words, noting the presence of variant readings, and analyzing the literary parameters of a text. Make note of places where translations vary from one another in order to assess how significant these variations might be for understanding the text.

There is no such thing as a completely literal translation. All translations involve some level of interpretation on the part of the translator(s). Most translations provide an explanation of the philosophies that guide the translation. These philosophies range from near word-for-word correspondences to dynamic equivalents. Word-for-word translations, such as the NASB, attempt, as far as possible, to provide one English word in the translation for each Hebrew word in the original. Some translations even seek to mirror the sequence of the Hebrew words when translating if it does not contradict English syntactical rules.

More translations use some level of dynamic equivalence, though there is a wide range within this group. Translators using dynamic equivalence prefer to translate by thought units rather than word for word. Some of these translations, such as the NRSV and NIV, attempt to stay fairly close to a word-for-word translation, while others, such as the NLT and CEB, look for ways to translate into more idiomatic speech.

Both ends of the spectrum recognize the need for the translation to read smoothly when read by native English speakers. For this reason, they will often interpret Hebrew phrases into equivalent English phrases, or they will interpret phrases to match more common English syntax. For example, both the NIV and the NRSV will translate the phrase “sons of Israel” as “Israelites” (see, e.g., Gen. 32:32; cf. NASB “sons of Israel”). The NRSV will also translate the phrase as “people of Israel” (see Amos 3:1, where even the KJV translated the phrase as “children of Israel”). These variations occur when the context, in the translation team’s opinion, relates to a mixture of men and women. In biblical Hebrew, groups of mixed gender will typically be addressed with masculine terms, while modern English prefers to use gender-neutral terms for groups of men and women.

Interpreters should select several English translations, which will allow one to see the passage through the lens of several different interpreters. This variety provides help in three areas: seeing a word’s range of meaning,

recognizing variant readings, and determining where prophetic speeches start and stop.

First, English translations may help in determining a range of meanings for significant words. Multiple English words may provide students with a range of meaning for a given Hebrew word. For example, consider Micah 6:8, where the Hebrew word *hesed* is translated with a number of different English words in different versions: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love *kindness*, and to walk humbly with your God?” The NRSV uses “kindness” to translate *hesed*, as do the NIV, ESV, and NASB. Other translations include “mercy” (KJV, NKJ), “goodness” (JPS), and “be faithful” (NET). Each of these translations reflects one aspect of the Hebrew word *hesed*, but having to select only one word per translation gives a slightly different slant to this verse in English. Part of the interpreter’s job is to decide which nuance makes the best sense of the verse in context.

Second, different words may suggest a variety of word choice or may point to variant readings. For example, consider Zechariah 11:7a, which contains two different types of translation variations. The underlined sections of 11:7a shown in chart 2 illustrate the translation of a verb with roughly synonymous phrases (I became the shepherd/I pastured). By contrast, the italicized portions of the verse represent decisions of the translators regarding the original wording of the verse. The NASB reflects the Hebrew transmission as reflected in the Masoretic Text, which, while complicated syntactically, represents an appositional phrase further delineating “the flock doomed to slaughter.” By contrast, translators of the NRSV follow the Greek translation here, which reads “for the Canaanites of the flock” but then interpret “Canaanites” not as an ethnic term but as a slang term meaning “merchants” or “traders”—which it can mean in certain texts.

Despite the very different meanings, the Hebrew behind these two phrases contained the very same consonants. The difference lies in the way the Masoretic Text divides these consonants into two words (*lākēn ‘aniyyē*, “therefore the humble of”), while the Septuagint read them as one (*lakkāna’anî*, “for the Canaanites”). To understand the implications of these decisions, students will need to consult biblical commentaries. Certain commentary series provide

Chart 2: Translation Variants in Zechariah 11:7a

Zechariah 11:7a NRSV	Zechariah 11:7a NAS
So, <i>on behalf of the sheep merchants</i> , <u>I became the shepherd</u> of the flock doomed to slaughter.	So I <u>pastured</u> the flock doomed to slaughter, <i>hence the afflicted of the flock</i> .

an author's original translations with text critical notes that can clarify such issues (for example, Word Biblical Commentary, Anchor Bible, Hermeneia, NICOT, and Augsburg Continental Commentary series). While many of these discussions require knowledge of Hebrew to adjudicate competently, beginning students will nevertheless benefit from wading through some of these notes to understand the issues involved when they encounter different translations.

Third, English translations may provide some help in determining the literary parameters of the textual unit. Many printed English translations mark their understanding of where the units change through various visual techniques. Some translations use thematic titles to mark major transition points in the text. Some use blank lines, or extra spacing between lines at the end of one unit and the beginning of another. Some begin new units with new paragraphs, but this technique is harder in prophetic texts, since most of the prophetic units are composed in poetic lines. Some translations mark new units with bold numbers. Some make no indication. Electronic texts are less consistent, since many (especially those on the Internet) make no distinction between verses beginning new units and those which do not. It therefore becomes crucial for students to understand whether and how your printed Bibles mark transitions from one unit to another. As one sees the differences in translations, one will soon need to face the question of how and why one seeks to understand prophetic texts.

The Purpose and Process of Interpretation

The primary tasks of interpretation with respect to prophetic literature are more literary in nature than they are historical, sociological, or hermeneutical. Nevertheless, because prophetic texts reached their final forms more than 2000 years ago, and because the compilation of prophetic books presumes awareness of certain events, some historical awareness has to be developed. Further, different societal structures than those of the twenty-first-century American context must be taken into account. Theological concepts and presuppositions that predate Christianity need to be understood on their own terms (to the degree that is possible) before rushing too quickly to ask the question, how is this text relevant for modern Christians? In some pedagogical contexts (e.g., many Religious Studies programs), students will explore prophetic texts merely to understand them in their ancient contexts.

Chapters 2–6 will focus upon the questions necessary for accomplishing this goal. Chapters 2–6 will focus upon the literary procedure (chap. 2), investigating pertinent historical and sociological elements (chap. 3), exploring the way in which traditional prophetic forms shed light upon the rhetoric of

prophetic texts (chap. 4), analyzing a text's relationship to the larger context of the book (chap. 5), and common themes (chap. 6). These foci constitute foundational paths that will lead students to a deeper understanding of prophetic texts, within prophetic books, in their developing contexts.

It should be reiterated, and born in mind constantly, that these foci are not mechanical steps to be performed upon the text. The data and the questions that arise from these foci inform and influence one another. They offer correctives designed to help us understand prophetic texts in *their* contexts rather than forcing our assumptions onto texts written in a distant time and place. These foci also provide data that can change our perception of what a text is saying. For this reason, interpreters should reconsider how the results of the various foci enhance, challenge, and reconfigure our growing understanding of prophetic texts. These chapters, then, offer heuristic opportunities to focus on particular literary, historical, sociological, and conceptual questions, but they do not represent a linear path to a single correct interpretation.

In other contexts (e.g., most seminaries and divinity schools), students are asked to reflect upon how prophetic texts speak to communities of faith today. Chapter 6 will offer a few brief suggestions for how to begin this process responsibly, taking seriously the claims of prophetic texts and the needs of people of faith today. Communities of faith then and now are not the same, and some means of bridging the gap are necessary if one wishes to interpret prophetic texts as Scripture in modern, Christian contexts. This process involves understanding the nature and function of prophetic literature itself.

Beginning students are often surprised to learn that prophetic literature is not primarily predictive in nature. Rather, prophetic literature functions primarily as interpretive theological literature. Prophetic texts interpret personal, communal, religious, and political behavior in light of prophetic understandings of the expectations of God for God's people. In so doing, these texts also interpret history itself in light of these expectations.

Prophets, as presented in these prophetic writings, address people in crisis, whether those people know it or not. Prophetic speeches and personas confront ancient communities and powers with God's message. These confrontations use rhetoric that explicitly or implicitly challenges the hearers and readers of these texts to change their behavior. Yet most of the prophetic scrolls reached their final form at a time when the tradents were convinced that the people to whom these messages were originally addressed did not take them to heart.

Nevertheless, all four prophetic scrolls contain passages that also proclaim powerful messages of hope as well. Offering hope for something beyond the current crisis, at least for a faithful remnant, thus constitutes an important motivation for the collection and transmission of these prophetic scrolls,

even though a far larger percentage of the speeches contain words of judgment than words of hope. For this reason, one must learn to read prophetic texts on multiple levels. One must learn to hear the individual speeches and to separate the speeches from one another. One must, however, also learn to hear these speeches within their current literary contexts and to recognize how they may have been adapted when they were incorporated into the context. Finally, though, if one wishes to interpret prophetic literature as Scripture, one must also learn to hear these texts as theological witnesses by ancient communities of faith that deserve responsible theological reflection for today's world.